

Between June 22nd and August 4th, I felt my spirits flutter “under the nurturing conditions of hope, control, and opportunity.” My LIA project supervisor, used the quoted words above to succinctly describe the kind of wellness space that *Mind in Brent, Westminster, and Wandsworth (Mind-BWW)* hopes to create.

Mind-BWW is a mental health non-profit, working with those combatting mental health conditions in its three titular boroughs. The organization is funded by national health services, corporate partners, and philanthropic donors. It is not unusual to hear the staff’s musings about how any amount of hypothetical funding could make a difference. However, if not for such sparing comments revealing their internal constraints, *Mind-BWW*’s vitality and robust programming would only leave you dwelling on positives.

The organization provides an array of services for those affected with mental health conditions. Typically, service-users are referred to *Mind-BWW* by general practitioners, registered psychologists, or other service groups. Self-referrals are welcome too.

And while the service-users may arrive at the organization from varied inlets, they are the users are united in trusting that “hope, control, and opportunity” may be lurking among the organization’s many offerings: counseling, corporate and public education programs, and an extensive catalog of free weekly therapeutic community programs.

Work: Building and Running a Meditation Course

While I suspect that all of *Mind-BWW*’s divisions are worthy of interested participants’ trust, I can confidently vouch that the community programs have the potential to offset the deepest of despair. I spent my LIA on placement within the community division. I attended all of their service groups, with their catalog consisting of therapeutic yoga, music, creative writing, art, walking, and nature excursion groups.

My primary responsibility at *Mind-BWW* was designing and running an introductory meditation workshop, to add to their existing community programs. This experience was identity-defining, as I have discovered a service outlet that calls on my deepest passions, while reliably keeps me at the boundaries of exhilaration. I tip over into the exhibition each time a service-user shows signs of satisfaction or exhilaration.

I began designing the course in June, a month before my LIA start date. There seemed to be too many resources and methods to approach this course. The early creative decisions I made regarding the course content and format did not come from a place of confidence, but rather the simple pragmatic recognition that I did not have eternity to keep debating and catastrophizing.

As I made more of what I felt like these crass time-bound decisions, a thought kept returning: how in the world did I delude myself into believing that I was qualified to teach a meditation course, much less to an audience whose time and attention are precious commodities. Among the reasons for my reluctance, I had never compiled course materials before. I had never been answerable to the views and questions of a cohort of students. I had never worked with a group of mental health survivors.

I would like to say that I somehow found a way to silence these fears and doubts while I bullishly pushed forward, blazing with the Laidlaw values of courage and resilience. In truth, I only salvaged to keep those fears and doubts under lethal limits, given the reminder that I had once been in a comparable self-doubting state. When I embarked on my previous summer of research, I was clueless what qualitative research entailed. Before I began, I was

convinced that my participants would blindly see through my inexperience and that I would compose a final report that would have to keep vaulted away. Much to my surprise, my summer of research ended up being one of the most meaningful experiences in my life.

As reality amended and shaded in the contours of my imagination, I found myself connecting with an infinitely wise, humble, and inspiring group of people. My report was gushing with their insights, my grateful engagement evident in all the cracks between formal academic writing. The mere fact of having once proven to myself that I can take on a personally unprecedented project helped me find faith in my judgment when designing this course—perhaps these seemingly crass decisions might just pan out in unexpected ways.

My course consisted of six 2-hour sessions taking place each Wednesday, in addition to an optional 1-hour practice session on the subsequent Friday. Each session was dedicated to a different meditation practice.

Week 1 = Introduction

Week 2 = Mindfulness

Week 3 = Metta and Gratitude

Week 4 = Visualization

Week 5 = Flow-state and Journaling

Week 6 = Discussing Habit Formation + Course Consolidation

I titled my course “Touring a Museum of Meditative Practices,” because I was moved by the metaphor of giving my participants a tour of the diverse meditative practices available to conscious minds. I was driven by a strong urge to break the myth that meditation needs to be bland and ill-suited for anyone who is, as Jeff Warren and Dan Harris put it, “a fidgety-skeptic.”

This perfection is a myth for several reasons. Take, for instance, metta practice, during which meditators try to let their mind marinate and concentrate on the genuine intent of wishing well for others. Unlike beginner mindfulness sessions, metta sessions can be immediately engaging and often visceral uplifting. Likewise, visualization practices can feel abundantly exciting, as we use our imagination to break past the confines of ruminative cognition.

All of these meditation styles induce a spacious and selfless state of mind—a key finding from my previous summer of research. The interdependence between the styles of meditation means that beginners do not need to force themselves to practice in a style that feels draining and painful. They can choose a style which they enjoy, and without them realizing, they may already be warming themselves up to the alternative which they found intolerable.

In the introductory session of the course, I defined the project of meditation along similar lines. I also came forth about the values that have shaped the course. The three central values being...

- I will prompt not preach
- May we all embrace beginners' mind
- Individuals should customize their meditation practice

These values undoubtedly helped me maximize my potential as an instructor. I offered my content and understanding only as an introduction, but in no way the final sentence on these meditative practices. In embracing the beginner's mind, I chose to explain my content free from highfalutin agendas. I used comics, engaging activities, and manageable doses of practice sessions to help participants build an internal motivation towards meditating.

Concurrently, I encouraged the participants to remain closely aware of which styles they enjoyed best, choosing to build the practice from those fertile customized grounds.

I had also prepared for all the participants to receive a 6-sided cubic photo frame as a way to track and celebrate their progress in the course. After completing each session, they would receive a photograph to embellish their cube, formalizing the new therapeutic tool that they had acquired. The completed cube symbolically captured the internally-diverse yet unified project of meditation.

When running the course, I had the support of *MIND-BWW's* resident yoga therapist, Alina. She was a pillar of support for me, whose expertise in yoga and mindfulness helped enhance my content delivery. Alina also conducted the majority of the live meditation practices. Her experience working with this clientele was an incredible asset to the course, as she was able to tailor my content to the audience.

With clear values at heart, innovative ideas, and excellent collaborators by my side, I was able to successfully accomplish my first SMART goal: *Build a resonant workshop that combines integrated different modes of communication.*

Work: Volunteering at Community Programs

While running my meditation course, I also attended all of the remaining community groups, lending myself as a resource to the staff and peer to the service-users. The staff benefited from having a person that they could delegate some of their tasks towards, be those signing or ushering in participants. And whenever I felt like I was becoming an observer rather than a contributor at these, I shifted my focus towards forging connections with the service-users.

Of note, I learned extensively about community and mental health care by attending *Mind-BWW's* gardening groups. One of the gardening groups takes care of the London Zoo allotments. Here, instead of hiring caretakers, the Zoo personnel opted to allow *Mind-BWW* service users to find therapeutic flow while tending to the garden's extensive fruits, vegetables, and flowers. The second gardening project takes place at a local garden, in another non-profit's backyard. A therapeutic horticulturist joins the service-users at the letter, as the group collectively works to remodel the premises.

In both these groups, I worked, weeded, and watered plants along with the participants. Yet, the exhaustive work did not even feel like work, because once we were out on the grounds, I noticed a sense of responsibility kick in to care properly for the garden. When I intently paid attention to the plants and critters, I felt a parental desire to protect them. You see, if we haphazardly water, our vegetal children would be parched, perhaps not making it to our next meeting. From a mental health point of view, I found that taking ownership of something else's growth can be really empowering for the psyche, especially when we may doubt our own ability to grow. No wonder it was at this group that I had encountered a participant who had struggled immensely with mental health issues, only to find him now roaming the premises as a person in charge. Every session, this participant mentioned how coming to groups as such turned his life on its axis.

The gardening groups were just two examples. I could bring in a fresh set of insights for every single one of the community programs that I attended. And in honesty, I probably gained more than I contributed to these groups. Through volunteering at all the groups, my schedule ended up looking as wholesome as it gets. Gardening on Mondays; writing on Tuesdays; a much needed yoga and mindful respite on Wednesdays; more gardening on Thursdays; and a musical class of the cymbals to conclude the week.

My schedule made me feel humanized, because my work seemed to be close to that of a retiree. I jump between hobbies with no need of trying to be reductively and robotically productive. In keeping the latter attitude at bay, I felt like I was satisfying : being in nature, creatively expressing myself, and finding comfort in my mind and body.

Another outcome of volunteering was I got to learn about the participants' experientially rich life histories. I felt unfathomably grateful to be beholden to these stories, for all their diverse contextual and gut-wrenching elements. Learning about the participants' insights into their contexts only enhanced my respect for their courage in showing up to these groups, wearing their pursuit of relief on their sleeve.

This gratitude endured, as I underwent the intriguing experience of meeting people before their stories. Take it, for some participants, I only managed to content with them during our second or third interaction. As a result, I would learn about their pasts after several exclusive rounds of small talk. And I find it hard to understate the spiritual magnitude of having to reconcile the suffering a person has been through, when your initial impression of them has shrouded it all. This act of reconciliation is like trying to follow a theater show, wherein the backdrop changes radically, while the actor remains relatively unaltered in reciting her dialogue. It is enriching and dizzying to receive context in such a way.

Taken together, being at the community groups made me feel connected to humanity. It all touched me so profoundly, that I am continuing to unpack the lessons it has taught me.

Impact: What Was Achieved?

The impact that I left at Mind-BWW is primarily concentrated around my meditation course. My second SMART goal aims to address the external impact of the course: *Improve participants' understanding of meditation through the 6-week program.* We measured the impact using both quantitative and qualitative reports.

Firstly, I received quantitative data before and after the course via a participant questionnaire. Out of the 7 participants that completed the terminal questionnaire, everyone reported that their understanding of mindfulness and meditation had increased. 6 out of 7 participants gave me a full score on the quality of the course. These are numerical signs that the course had a strongly positive impact on the participants.

Furthermore, I received extremely encouraging qualitative reports that I will cherish for the rest of my career. On the final day of the course, several of the participants brought me gifts and spoke to how much this course has impacted them for the better. One of the participants cried on the last day. Another participant said that my family and mentors should be proud of the person I have become, because she was so excited to see how younger generations are becoming vocal about the values of leading a reflective spiritually-attuned life. Indeed, the most popular complaint that the participants had reported on the questionnaire was that the course was too short, and that they would wish to have me for longer.

Outside my course, I heard similarly qualitative sentiments from service-users and charity staff. For one, the participants at the gardening group showered me with love, and one of the participants packed me cake and fresh garden figs before I left. She gave me a hug, saying that I was like her daughter, making that goodbye feel as heavy as disappointing my mother. The goodbyes only got tougher when it came to the charity staff, who I had grown to vastly adore and admire. The staff thanked me for my work and contributions, while expressing their confidence that I will go on to help many others in the future.

The sum total of this feedback suggests that I have left an impact on the *Mind-BWW* community. Beyond everything, I hope that a part of this impact is in voicing and living out how meditation can help us bring out better versions of ourselves. The contributions I made at *Mind-BWW* would have been unimaginable had I not experimented with meditation way back in high school. Aside from the blatant fact of not having any content to teach, I also would not have been nearly as open-minded and compassionate as I am today.

When I consider the feedback that I received, I only think about how lucky I am to have served and learned from such an experientially rich community. While I appreciate these validating signs, I wish to remain unwavering in my own commitment to humility and beginners' minds.

Hence, I humbly look to improve in the areas presenting growth opportunities. For the course, I will make sure that technology and presentation are working optimally. While technological hitches are to be expected, avoiding them is best to not have the participants' mind be distracted from the course content. In addition, I wish to further explore how I can make the course more accessible to a divergent group of learners, notable for those who do not have a command of keenness in using language for learning. How might I be able to cater to their learning style? This remains an issue for me to address, as I research further into mental healthcare.

Sustainability: Was This Project Made to Last?

After addressing the immediate impact of my LAI, I now question the long-term impacts. For the meditation course, on the one hand, I wonder how sustainable the impacts will be, given that only 8 people consistently attended the course. Eight does not seem like a big number, compared to the millions of people out there who are dealing with mental health conditions.

I further wonder about the sustainability of projects as such, considering the ages of the stakeholders involved. It has become fashionable to think of age as a construct in many academic circles. However, outside of academic boundaries, age can still be a tightly-held identifier. My presence—as a 19-yr old instructor—may feel dismissive to someone who has years of life experience. Furthermore, it does not seem like meditative circles are largely popular among the youth. Of all the participants that attended my course, none would have been my age. How might we keep up the momentum with meditation and mindfulness if it becomes reserved for those in the later stages of their life?

While these concerns about long-term sustainability linger, I find comfort in the highly promising signs that this course may keep growing its ripples into the future. For one, the excitement that I saw on my participants' faces may lead to a surprising number of outcomes. Maybe this six-week period has given them enough reason to embark on the process of building a robust meditation practice. Maybe they will convince their peers and family to try their hand at meditation. Maybe others will grow curious to get involved with organization as word gets around.

The final session of the course was about habit formation, an opportunity for us to discuss together how to make sure that these 6-weeks do not automatically become a fever dream, which they will come to reminisce about. Instead, I wanted each of the participants to introspect whether they wanted meditation to be a part of their future. If so, we brainstormed solutions to the looming difficult question together: so, what are we going to do now?



Image Courtesy: Andrew Grossman

In a further effort to make the impacts of this course sustainable, I began speaking with a student and service-user, who was keen on starting a new community group at *Mind-BWW*. She seemed invested in the idea of starting a meditation group to carry on from the course's principles, to which I offered my radiant blessing and assurance that I would be willing to support her in any way I can. If this group were to be created, then we could answer the participants' requests to extend the course.

Still, the ultimate fate of my third SMART goal is up for time to have its last say: *Obtain an increase in participants willingness to continue with mindfulness and meditation after the program.*

Concluding Thoughts on Mindful Leadership:

Despite my excursion being called *Leadership-in-Action*, I admit that I hardly ever thought of myself as a leader while in London, except for the hours spent racing to complete my weekly reflections. The role that I was aspiring towards in all my other waking moments was that of an observant, compassionate, and uplifting human being. In fact, I could collapse all of those adjectives down to one: mindful. To me, mindfulness is an umbrella term for a number of leadership values. Mindful individuals are called upon to be patient, curious, and non-judgmental of their surroundings. They seek opportunities to be selfless, whether that be by simply appreciating things outside the self or even finding ways to support their communities.

One of the greatest pleasures of my LIA was getting to recharge my appreciation for mindfulness in parallel with my students. Preparing for my classes meant that I was thinking more about wholesome concepts, and I could see how this was refeeding character. During the gratitude week, I noticed myself stopping to be thankful for more things. During the

visualization week, I let my mind enter more imaginative adventures. And during the journaling week, I made it a point to find patterns in my recurrent ideas and reflections.

The joy of learning to live by mindful values, while being intimately connected to your surroundings, seems to me a core part of leadership. I doubt that I would have been able to extract so much out of my LIA, had I not been able to fall in love once again with mindfulness—the gift that allows me to find greater gifts in all my life experiences. Thus, I take time to thank mindfulness for being the vital force that connects and supplied all my enormously meaningful experiences at *Mind-BWW*. And if it has made me a better leader, more power to it.